DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 767 CS 506 925

AUTHOR Palmerton, Patricia R.
TITLE The Reign of Confusion: ABC and the "Crisis in Iran."
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Television; Cultural Context; Figurative Language; Foreign Countries; International Relations; Journalism; *Mass Media Role; Media Research; *News Reporting; Presidents of the United States; *Rhetorical Criticism; *Terrorism
IDENTIFIERS American Broadcasting Company; Carter (Jimmy); *Iran Hostage Crisis; Khomeini (Ayatollah Ruhollah); *Media Coverage

ABSTRACT

A study examined reports broadcast by ABC News between November 8, 1979 and December 7, 1979 in its series entitled "Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage." Transcripts of approximately 50% of actual broadcasts were subjected to rhetorical critical analysis, from which the finding emerged that confusion was the predominant characteristic in ABC's description of events in Iran. President Jimmy Carter and the Ayatollah Khomeini were portrayed by ABC as potentially able to bring order to the situation but failing to do so. Americans were described as "frustrated" and "outraged," and their reactions shown as contrasting sharply with the Carter Administration's measured approach, were contrasted with the Carter Administration's measured approach, which was portrayed as being based on principles and high morals. The meaning of the crisis came to be summarized in ABC coverage as a test of the strength, image, and power of the United States. The analysis shows that events were considered for their symbolic value even more than for their pragmatic effects. Power became critically tied to image, and the possibility of American military action came to be viewed from the perspective of what message it would send to Iran and of the American unity it would reflect. Such attempts to label events based upon predisposed ideas, expectations, and limited knowledge prevent Americans from seeing the realities of given situations. (Eighty-five notes are included.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED314767

The Reign of Confusion:

ABC and the 'Crisis in Iran'

by

Patricia R. Palmerton

Department of Theatre & Communication Arts
Hamline University
St. Paul, Minnesota 55104

Presented at the

Speech Communication Association Convention
San Francisco, CA
November 1989

CS506925

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Patricia R. Palmerton
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Reign of Confusion: ABC and the 'Crisis in Iran'

Terrorism has become a fact of modern life. In a span of 20 years concern about terrorism has grown dramatically in scholarly and political circles as well as in the eyes of the general public.[1] Nevertheless, according to one scholar the American public and the government "have failed to appreciate the nature, scope, and intensity of the terrorist threat. Americans tend to see terrorism as a 'nuisance' or 'irritant.'"[2] Those who study the interaction of terrorism with media coverage have expressed somewhat different viewpoints, citing instances in which coverage of terrorism has substantially amplified or exaggerated the instrumental significance of the actions reported, resulting in responses are varied as canceled tourist bookings to calls for greater retaliation against those deemed "terrorist."[3]

How we respond to events is influenced by the ways in which we interpret them. How we react to terrorism, whether by seeing it as an "irritant" or as a threat to the free world, is influenced in part by the ways in which we attempt to put "terrorist" events into a meaningful framework. It has been argued that the persuasive power of terrorism lies not in the words uttered by those labeled terrorists, rather in the responses others make to the terrorist action.[4] One level of response involves news coverage of these events, the primary means by which most Americans gain their knowledge about terrorism. How news providers discuss terrorist events has the potential for significant influence on overall response to these events. It has been shown previously that news coverage reinforces terrorist strategy by calling into question the effectiveness of the current power structure.[5] This study continues work attempting to discern patterns of interaction between news coverage and terrorist strategy. In this paper I will examine coverage provided by ABC News in the series titled The Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage. In particular, I will focus my

---

[1] Ronald Crelinsten found that indexed references to terrorism grew exponentially between 1966 and 1985, from no references in early years to 414 articles in 1981 in one newspaper alone. Crelinsten argues these differences are not only due to an increase in incidents, but also to changes in the way violent events are framed by news providers. Ronald Crelinsten, "Images of Terrorism in the Media 1966-1985," presented at The Terrorism and the News Media Research Project Conference, "Communication in Terrorist Events: Functions, Themes and Consequences," Boston, MA 1988.

[2] Yonah Alexander, "The Terrorism Problem," Terrorism: An International Journal, vol. 8, #3, 1986: 274.

[3] See, for example, Robert G. Picard, "The Conundrum of News Coverage of Terrorism," Toledo Law Review 18 (1986): 141-150. See also Robert G. Picard, "News Coverage as the Contagion of Terrorism: Dangerous Charges Backed by Dubious Science," Political Communication and Persuasion 3 (1986): 385-400.

[4] Patricia R. Palmerton, "The Rhetoric of Terrorism and Media Response to the 'Crisis in Iran'". Western Journal of Speech Communication, 52 (Spring 1988), 105-121.

[5] Palmerton, 1988.

attention on the perspectives which evolved through this coverage and implications in light of terrorist strategy.[6]

American concern over terrorist actions reached its zenith during the events we now call the "Iranian Hostage Crisis" when a group of Iranians took control of the American Embassy in Teheran, Iran, November 4, 1979. In a nightly mantra we were reminded that the lives of some 50 hostages were hanging in the balance, all of us victims of an inchoate series of actions which we labeled "terrorism". At the time of the Embassy seizure there were no national television news correspondents in Teheran. ABC News quickly sent a correspondent, Bob Dyk, to Teheran to cover the events. Shortly after he arrived, Iran closed its borders to foreign news correspondents, leaving Dyk as the sole U.S. national television news correspondent in Teheran for several days.[7] ABC News therefore had the only correspondent on location during the early developments of the "crisis," giving ABC the authority of immediacy and of having access to unfiltered and uncensored information. The network exploited its advantage with the Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage series which began on November 8. On November 15, the network committed itself to nightly broadcasts focusing on the "Iran Crisis".[8]

The news coverage discussed here was broadcast by ABC News between November 8, 1979 and December 7, 1979. I included all available recordings of broadcasts of the Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage series during this time period, approximately a 50% sample of actual broadcasts.[9] Transcripts of each broadcast were subjected to rhetorical critical analysis, using an experiential approach to criticism. All broadcasts were also viewed, and visual images were considered in relationship to the patterns elucidated in the discourse.

The predominant characteristic of the coverage provided by ABC in these broadcasts is that of confusion. ABC examines each of the pieces which comprise the situation in detail, yet no coherent pattern emerges. As a result, there are consistent

---

[6] The reader should note that when I refer to "ABC" and "ABC perspective" I mean that associated with the America Held Hostage series. I do not, on the basis of this research, generalize to all ABC News coverage.

[7] Frederic B. Hill, "Media Diplomacy: Crisis Management with an Eye on the TV Screen," Washington Journalism Review (May 1981): 23-27.

[8] ABC News, The Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage, Day 12, 11/15/79, p. 5. Excerpts will be identified by date and page of transcript. All transcripts of the America Held Hostage programs reviewed here were prepared by this writer. The page number provided is merely to help the reader get an approximate idea of the point at which the excerpt occurred in the broadcasts, and should not be expected to correspond to any other prepared transcripts. Audio-tapes of ABC News, The Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage, Day 'XXX' series were provided by the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

[9] To my knowledge, these tapes are the only existing record of these broadcasts. The Crisis in Iran series became ABC News Nightline in March of 1980. At that time ABC began making transcripts of this program. ABC does not have transcripts or tapes of the early Crisis in Iran broadcasts [personal communication with ABC News].

attempts to discover reasons and explanations for the events unfolding in order to gain understanding and to enable us to have influence. Confusion, however, is the unifying thread underlying ABC discourse. The subsequent search for explanation and order has two major consequences: the need to define in the face of the undefinable and the emergence of a humanitarian criterion by which to judge the actions of the Carter Administration. Ultimately, the struggle comes to be seen as a symbolic one in which a win or a loss is measured by the ability to define the situation and maintain that definition. The incoherence of the situation creates pressure to fill the void of sense, and functions as a powerful force for accepting a familiar perspective regardless of its instrumentality.

Pattern or Chaos?

Confusion is the predominant characteristic in ABC's descriptions of events in Iran, evident first in the attempts to convey the quality of the situation. Individual participants, actions, and even intentions are described as subordinate to and derivative from the situation itself. ABC examines people, places, cultures, history, time, disease, emotions, perceptions, beliefs (to name a few) in an effort to understand the situation as a whole. In ABC coverage the cause of this crisis lies buried in the complexity of the situation and the way to defuse the crisis is through understanding the totality of the situation. This is a systemic view as well, wherein change in any one element of the system has the potential to change the system. It is a paradoxical construction, however, because the system described by ABC is self-reflexive: the system creates the nature of its own parts, which in turn influence the system. ABC develops a view which seems to promise the possibility of impact through understanding, while at the same time showing that the system is impervious, existing through self-creation. It is essentially a closed system where the nature of the system has already determined the character of its parts and the potential for change in any one of those parts. This paradox assures that confusion will remain the predominant feature of this situation.

ABC begins its examination of the Iran crisis with references to the pictures representing the events:

> [Chanting]: Go home Yankee! Go home Yankee! Go home Yankee!
> *ABC*: Look at this. One American, blindfolded, handcuffed. Today, in the courtyard of the American Embassy in Teheran. He and 60 some others, still held hostage and threatened in a country out of control. The pictures exclusive, as are so many more in this broadcast. (11/8,p.1)

The situation in Iran is described as disorderly, chaotic, "out of control," "disturbing," "murky," "unpredictable."[10] "Mass demonstrations" in the streets indicate

---

[10] For example, 11/8, p. 1; 11/14, p. 3; 11/19, p. 1; 11/23, p. 8; 11/26, p. 6.

a situation where control is at best tenuous. These are "mobs" making threats, who have "imprisoned" the hostages.[11] The Iranians are contradictory and confusing, we are told (11/23, p. 2). Religious fervor mixed with emotional involvement results in volatility and confusion. "Thousands of Iranians kneel in prayer . . . [t]hen march to the embassy shouting 'Death to the Americans'" (11/14, p.4). "80,000 Iranians [are] demonstrating in a highly emotional state" (11/16, p.5). However, it is unclear whether those storming the embassy are "a mob acting spontaneously" or whether they are mechanistic: manipulated and orchestrated.[12] ABC tells us the "militants" play to the "mob" by parading a hostage before it (11/14, p.4). It is a "howling mob" but its chants are "robot-like" and "familiar" (11/15, p.1). It is "the same tiresome scene"(11/15, p. 1). "They marched again today. They march every day. And I know you're weary of seeing it. So are we."[13] The situation, the actions, and the words don't fit, the bizarre result of routine in the midst of fervor:

> In much of Teheran today it is business as usual. Traffic in the streets lives up to its reputation as some of the most jammed, most accident prone in the world. . . . But the focal point has been the front gate [of the embassy]. The cast of Iranian characters seems to change hourly. They never seem to tire of chanting, much of it orchestrated by cheer leaders perched atop the embassy walls. [Chanting, call-response chants in background]. And it really is only at the front gate. The street in front of the embassy resembles a block party. Junk food stalls have sprung up in several locations to serve those who come here. . . . Ignore this area and avoid the Iranian mass media and you might never know of the test of wills going on here (11/19, p. 6).[14]

Though the situation may be out of control, the crowd is not. There is an intentional process going on here, as shown by ABC, in which the crowds, the people, are exerting their power through controlled exercise of expression.[15] In the overall context of the situation, the power of the crowd and the intentional nature of the crowd are clear. It is still not clear, however, that control resides with the people. The

---

[11] 11/8, p. 1-2, 5.

[12] 11/14, p. 3. See also 11/15, pp. 1, 3; 11/16, pp. 4-5; 11/19, p. 6; 11/20, p. 8, also corresponding video.

[13] 11/23, p. 1. See also 11/14, p. 1; 11/15/, p. 3; 12/3, p. 6; 12/7, p. 8.

[14] Note again the careful construction of the physical scene in both of these excerpts, as well as the precise detail as to time.

[15] Because of a lack of rational grounds for behavior; 11/20, p. 8. Carter attempts to separate responsibility for events from the crowd as well, according to ABC: "It was not really the mob in Teheran that had seized the embassy said the President, it was the government of Iran" (11/15, p. 2). If the locus of control is external to the crowd, responsibility would be as well.

crowds are not out of control, but what provides that control isn't necessarily the crowd itself. Even by November 20, the crowd is described as guided by "fervor," bringing into question the extent to which the crowd can control itself. That the crowd might be subject to manipulation by others further points out the possibility that the locus of control lay elsewhere.[16] ABC described Iran as a "country out of control," a case of contradictions where "nothing seems to have changed . . . [while] much has happened" (11/14, p. 1).

The reason for the "U.S. being in this fix"? The Shah's cancer (11/8, p. 4). Ultimately, the blame lay with an unknown factor which caused this disease. Cancer is an entity which occurs regardless of fault. We cannot control its occurrence; it is a natural process. The Shah has not created this situation, his cancer has.

> *Barbara Walters*: [The Shah] said that he hadn't wanted to come to this country in the first place. . . . He said that if he had not needed very sophisticated diagnosis here . . . he would not have come here but it was thought that if he stayed in Mexico he would die (11/22, p. 1-2).

The Shah is also not to be blamed for the political ramifications of his attempts to treat his cancer, for ultimately he is subject to the decisions and actions of others. Others decide his medical treatment.[17] Others decide his political treatment (will he or will he not be allowed into the United States?).[18] His responsibility for the current events is limited, as he is subject to the decisions made by his disease, his doctors and U.S. government officials. The portrayal of the Shah and his disease reinforces the situational basis of these events, for there is no entity to blame. Rather, these events are shown as a natural progression given the elements already functioning in the situation.

The historical context gives further reasons for events unfolding as they do, as ABC describes the situation. ABC examines historical and political context, geography, medicine, time, and place--all pointing to the situation as being the fundamental force behind this crisis. ABC notes that "Iranian mobs" drove the Shah out of Iran (11/8, p. 4), a result of his policies and actions:

---

[16] On November 21, the American Embassy in Pakistan is overrun and ABC's descriptions again emphasizes the situation: "Now it is a crescent of crisis sweeping across the world of Islam like a cyclone hurtling across a prairie. A cyclone of political and religious extremism" (11/21, p. 1).

[17] See, e.g., 11/8, p. 4-6; 11/23, p. 1-2; 11/26, p. 4; 11/28, p. 9.

[18] Kissinger, Rockefeller, and Nixon are all linked to decisions to admit the Shah to the United States. Carter is described as "holding firm", agreeing to admit him only when a New York doctor certifies that the Shah is "very ill." (11/8, p. 5). See also discussion of the search for an acceptable place for the Shah when he leaves the U.S. (12/3, p. 2-4), and discussions of the Shah and his family as victims of events (12/7, p. 9-10) or as victimizer (11/28, p. 8-9).

> *ABC*: Once, before he was driven out, the Shah was asked . . . whether, in view of his power, he would be willing to permit any criticism of his regime:
> '*Shah*: No.
> *ABC*: Why not?
> *Shah*: Because the person of the king . . . you are the law in the world. You cannot insult the king.'
> *ABC*: Anyone who did in the early as well as in the final days of the Shah's regime faced torture and prison. So the nature of terrorism hasn't changed much in 30 years. . . . [I]n Iran it has turned full circle now. No longer from the Shah but from the people who used to call him a terrorist (11/8,p. 7).[19]

Regardless of the Shah's past action, however, none if this would matter had the Shah not gotten cancer. The fact that the Shah is subject to the situation overrides his having been instrumental in creating it. As such, he is divested of responsibility.

The importance of understanding the situation is reinforced by consistent references to the location of events geographically and in time. Correspondents routinely indicate their location, and often provide detailed geographical descriptions. Frank Reynolds and the correspondents in Teheran have long discussions giving the chronology of events, from "Day 1" through the current day. Viewers are provided with month by month chronologies of events after the Shah's ouster from Iran.[20] Continual reference to the number of days passed since the inception of events additionally emphasize that time is an important referent for the overall context:[21]

> Today, Day eleven, the State Department was . . . . So tonight, on this eleventh day of the crisis . . . (11/14, p. 6)

> Teheran, Day 13. The thirteenth day of mass demonstrations. . . . For thirteen days now the State Department . . . . (11/16, p. 1, 6).

---

[19] Note ABC's attribution: the Iranians called the Shah a terrorist, not the U.S. ABC also examines the current political scene, comparing the use of "terrorism" by the Iranians to actions taken by government of the Philippines (under Marcos) and Chile (11/8, pp. 6-7). See also 11/8, pp. 3-4 for a discussion of political context; also 11/14, pp. 8-9, 11/16, p. 6, 11/19, pp. 4-5, 11/20, p. 3; for cultural context see 11/15, p. 3, 11/16, pp. 9-10, 11/20, pp. 7-8.

[20] E.g., 11/8, pp. 4-5, pp. 10-11; 11/14, pp. 3-4.

[21] Each broadcast, after the first one, contained a count of the days held hostage in the title: "The Crisis in Iran: America Held Hostage, Day 11"; ". . . Day 13"; ". . . Day 17" and so forth. Verbal references occur throughout the broadcasts, for example, five verbal references on November 14, three in 15 minutes on November 15, five on November 16, four of which occur within the first minute of the broadcast. The daily count also appears in transitions.

> So here on Day 17 of this crisis the American government has taken its strongest stand yet. It is fair to ask how the American people are likely to respond (11/20, p. 8).

> And inside the Embassy compound 49 American hostages are beginning their 26th day of captivity (11/28, p. 10)

> So to sum up tonight after 30 days of America held hostage, the 31st day of captivity is now beginning for the 50 Americans in Teheran (12/3, p. 7).

Time is "long" and it is on the side of the Iranians:

> *Frank Reynolds*: Do [the Iranians] believe that time is on their side . . . ?
> *Peter Jennings*: Yes . . . I must tell you that in this revolution and in this part of the world generally, time is a different factor than it is in the United States (11/16, p. 9)[22]

The time passed, the time waited, and the time spent:

> There is little time at the top these days for anything but Iran. Every day . . . hours are spent preparing options papers . . . hours are spent briefing [others]. . . . Today, out of a 14-hour workday Secretary Vance spent roughly ten of those hours on Iran (11/15, pp. 6-7).

Time is no longer just a peripheral marker with which to introduce or flag a story. While a useful journalistic device for organizing a set observations, in ABC coverage time becomes a characteristic by which to define the overall situation.[23]

ABC's examination portrays a situation where these events are a natural occurrence, given the circumstances. By placing responsibility on the situation itself the parties to these events are relieved of responsibility because they are merely responding as the situation would dictate--a relief extended to both Iranians and

---

[22] See also 11/14, p. 2; 11/15, p. 1.

[23] As time is the measure of the situation, so too does it become a gauge by which to judge it.

Americans.[24] With cause rooted in the situation itself, then in order to have impact one would have to become part of the historical and political context by changing one aspect of the system. However, the events are *natural* outcomes of the situation. To effect change would be to change the course of nature. Since the elements of the system are by definition disordered and chaotic those attempting to understand the crisis are faced with a dilemma in which they must determine the means of control in a situation which by its very nature is defined as uncontrollable. The rhetorical imperative is circular and paradoxical: have impact upon an event which essentially dictates the actions which could have impact.

For those party to the ABC construction of this crisis, the dilemma creates a surreal quality, for control and influence *seem* to be realistic aims. Despite the circularity of the dilemma the question becomes one of determining the character and ordering of the system so as to find the pressure points. ABC's response is consistent: try to understand and define the situation in order to find a means of influence or a way to disengage.

The Search for Order

The primary candidates for controlling force in ABC discourse are President Carter, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Iranian people. Each is portrayed as potentially able to bring order to the situation but failing to do so.

President Carter and The Humanitarian Criterion

The humanitarian value system guiding the Carter Administration is emphasized from the outset. For example, the decision to admit the Shah is said to be for "purely humanitarian reasons" (11/8, p. 5), pitting national interest against humanitarian principle.[25] Carter is the humanitarian, in ABC descriptions, upholding humanitarian values, putting the lives of the American hostages as the priority, and protecting what is "right".

---

[24] ABC's use of passive voice stresses also emphasizes the background situation by focusing attention upon action as opposed those acting. For example, the United States "is told," "is alerted," or "is assured;" the President meets with his advisors and "points of policy are decided" (11/14, p. 3). In Iran a flag "was apparently taken" and "was burned" (11/8, p. 1). In ABC coverage the relative anonymity of the actors tends to emphasize the situation again; activities are placed in context, further focusing attention upon the relationship between the actions and the situation.

[25] Secretary of State Vance is quoted as saying that "Admitting the Shah may seem right, but I do not think it would be in our national interest to do so. . . . We have had to take into account the possible dangers to American people"(11/8, p. 5). ABC goes on to say: "The decision to allow the Shah in [the United States] apparently was a calculated risk. It didn't work because the state of anarchy in Iran is such that it's not possible to deal with that country in any logical or rational way" (11/8, p. 6). "Larger principles" are often referenced, e.g., 11/8, p. 3; 11/23, p. 1-2.

ABC's focus upon the hostages and their families highlights concern over life, reinforcing the validity of the humanitarian criterion. We see real people at the mercy of others. The hostages are "put under lock and key", blindfolded, turned to face reporters, crowds, mobs, led around, kept out of sight (11/8, p. 2).[26] ABC shows these regular people as being used by the Iranians to "play" to the crowds and the cameras, and being subjected to threats to kill them "if the U.S. makes any attempt to rescue them" (11/14, p. 3).[27] The hostages are held, seized, displayed, always objects, acted upon by others.[28]

In the United States, however, the hostages are not abstractions or objects, as seen on ABC. They are real people, people like us, with families like us, and they are suffering. ABC's excerpt of a State Department briefing is a good example:

> *Hodding Carter [State Department Spokesperson]*: They are isolated from each other. Some of them seem to remain bound, hand and foot. . . . [S]ome of them may yet be occasionally blindfolded. I mean there, it is not a situation which is conducive to good mental health [sic].
> *ABC*: In fact, government officials who specialize in hostage situations warn that for some of the people the ordeal will almost certainly result in serious personality disorders even after they're released.[29]

For the families, the wait is "agonizing," according to ABC. "The not knowing . . . the not knowing is just terrible." "This is one pain I'll never get over. The agony is unbearable."[30] The days for the families are filled with anxiety, hopes being raised and dashed again. The family members, too, are real people, emotional people, happy when news comes of the release of a family member, frustrated, angry, and fearful when confronted with an unending situation.[31] "They've watched . . . they've been frustrated . . . they've reacted in quite different ways" says ABC about the families (11/20, p. 5). The hostages, through the portrayal of their families become more than pawns used by the Iranians or representatives of the United States government. They

---

26 Also 11/14, p. 4.

27 See also 11/14, p. 4; 11/15, pp. 3-4.

28 See for example, 11/14, pp. 3-5; 11/15, pp. 1-2, p. 5; 11/16, pp. 2-4; 11/19, pp. 1-4, 6; 11/20, pp. 1, 4-5.

29 11/15, p. 2. On 11/22, Thanksgiving Day, the plight of the hostages is contrasted to the feasts other Americans enjoy, another example of their identification with average Americans: "Well, we don't know what the hostages being held in Iran had to eat today. We can assume they were fed" (11/22, p. 6).

30 11/8, p. 15. Note the role that time also plays in the suffering felt by the families of the hostages.

31 11/19, p. 2; 11/20, pp. 5-6.

are *us*, with mothers, fathers, wives, siblings. The pain of the families is very personal, very human, and very close.

The emphasis upon the families and their humanity reinforces the verbalized commitment of the Carter Administration that the lives of the hostages are a priority.[32] The willingness of the United States to stand by principle is the overriding value, accounting for what might be considered by others as evidence of poor judgment. For example, Carter puts the lives of the hostages ahead of popularity as portrayed by ABC, sticking by his chosen course as the wisest and most principled one. Carter's priority is to deal with this situation wisely given its constraints, even if it makes him *look* bad and even if Americans think worse of him:

> *Male voice*: Well, the choice is war now or gradually giving the world to the Russians and the Communist-backed revolutionaries, quote/unquote [sic], and the students, quote/unquote [sic], then I think, you know, it's time to land 30,000 Marines on the shore of Iran and go in and take over the American property which the U.S. embassy is.
> *ABC*: Well, why not? Plain and simply the President's advisors feel that military intervention would be the surest way of getting the hostages killed.
>
> .....
>
> *3rd male voice*: If I was President Carter, I don't think it'd be any problem makin' a decision at all because the first thing that I would do would be to deport all of these Iranian students....
> *ABC*: It's not quite that cut and dried. A lot of Iranians are in this country now under less than legitimate circumstances and Washington is considering the deportation of those people. But not now. Again the concern is for the hostages.... [I]t might make some people feel good to kick those Iranian demonstrators out of the country but it wouldn't do a thing toward gaining the release of the hostages (11/8, pp. 8-10).

Carter is clearly portrayed as an individual concerned more for others than for himself or his own image. He may be criticized but, according to ABC, he "hits back hard," showing moral strength in the face of adversity:

---

32 ABC shows President Carter asserting the position that the "lives of our people are at stake," and that the lives of the hostages must remain the highest concern. Carter meets with families as well, reported by ABC, reinforcing the notion of this commitment to hostage lives (11/14, p. 4). See also 11/8, p. 11-12; 11/14, p. 5-6; 11/15, p. 1; 11/16, p. 5.

> *Robert Strauss [Carter campaign manager]*: People are calling me from all over . . . who are not thinking, who say "The President oughta' move in there and bang away and do this and that and the other thing and show his macho and he'll go up 20 points in the polls." Well, the truth of the matter is, he'd also destroy somewhere between 58 and 500 lives of American people. So that's a luxury he can't afford himself (11/8, pp. 10-11). [33]

American *inaction* is tied to "this country's concern for human life."[34] President Carter's policy of restraint is an indication of a President purposefully taking action by holding firm.

This perspective, that Carter and the United States is not powerless but *choosing* inaction, is reinforced through references to tangible results obtained elsewhere: for example, effectively taming Congressional reaction by urging Congressmen to "cool it" (11/8, p. 12).[35] The President "did do something" by cutting off oil imports, says ABC, and by freezing Iranian financial assets (11/14, p. 5).[36] Carter critics are quoted and placed in juxtaposition to ABC's vision of a President actively choosing to remain inactive (with certain exceptions), despite ill-advised pressure:

> But right after the Ayatollah, all the outrage and frustration fell squarely on the shoulders of Jimmy Carter, who late in the first week at the White House steak dinner he had to keep told a reporter, 'This is the worst week of my presidency.' The newspapers reflected this pressure, summed up in the biting words of columnist Joseph Kraft who wrote, 'There is nothing in the Constitution that obliges this country to be run by a President whose instinctive reaction to a challenge is a declaration of

---

[33] The Administration is also portrayed as open-minded in pursuit of an acceptable solution, utilizing even the Palestine Liberation Organization in a "highly responsible action in a situation where they may have some influence" (Hodding Carter, 11/8, p. 9). See also 11/14, p. 3, and 11/15, p. 5 for portrayal of Administration concern with principles of justice.

[34] 11/14, p. 5. See also 11/28, p. 3-4.

[35] The Administration action is done in conjunction with Con-gressional leaders, according to ABC, implying shared responsibility.

[36] The freezing of assets is described earlier in this broadcast in terms that depict Carter as a true rescuer: "President Carter acted, freezing the cash before it had a chance to melt away. The Iranians were outraged. . . . " (11/14, p. 2).

national impotence.' But the President held firm (11/14, p. 5).[37]

The firmness of U.S. character, ascribed to both Carter and to the U.S., is a recurrent theme in ABC coverage and also reinforces the sense of moral strength in the face of adversity. The United States is "careful" but "firm" (11/8, p. 7).[38] The refusal of the United States to negotiate "under the gun" is placed in relationship to the need to "demonstrate . . . firm leadership" (11/14, p. 6). Carter's "tough talk" gains a "huge response," even from critics (11/15, p. 2). The firmness of the United States, moreover, is a reasonable thing, emphasizing again high moral character. It is not inflexible rigidity. "But the United States is still standing firm on the basic principle of getting all the hostages out" says ABC, even while recognizing Iranian desires and showing a willingness to respond to those desires given the correct moral resolution: "The United States has made it quite clear that once the hostages are released there could be a debate at the United Nations [airing Iranian grievances]" (11/19, p. 4). The "determination of the United States to "stand firm" is confirmed as the "American government [takes] its strongest stand yet" (11/20, p. 9).[39]

Carter's resolve is shown as having personal consequences as well, emphasizing his moral character. He "labors" under "pressures" (11/14, p. 6); he delays campaigning for his own bid for reelection, he cancels his own vacation.[40] Ultimately, the situation is described as so powerful it may be able to make Carter's future or ruin it: "Depending on the outcome, this could be the worst time of Mr. Carter's presidency, or perhaps, one of the best" (11/14, p. 6).[41] Carter's potential sacrifice is a consequence of maintaining the wisest course despite pressure to the contrary; nevertheless, the outcome depends upon the dynamics of the situation.

In the search for pressure points in the system, Carter's failure to have impact is explained and legitimized by the humanitarian criterion. However, in the search for some means to change the situation or to disengage, Carter's moral strength and

---

37 Note the careful construction of the background situation in describing this event, another example of setting action in context.

38 See also 11/15, p. 5.

39 The President even wears "firmness" in his demeanor as described by ABC: "He looks grim, and instead of a certain looseness in his walk he moves to his office in the chin out ram-rod straight fashion of the Naval officer he once was." (11/20, p. 1). See also 11/19, p. 4.

40 11/16, p. 6; see also 11/8, p. 11.

41 See also 11/16, p. 5.

humanitarian restraint offer little.[42] This becomes painfully obvious when juxtaposed to American reaction to the situation in Iran.

The American People

According to ABC, this is a powerful situation having immense impact upon the American people. "Everybody in America" wants to know about the intentions of the Iranians, ABC's audience and the Iranians are told (11/16, p. 3). Americans a highly involved, they are concerned, they are "frustrated" and they are "outraged" (11/8, pp. 8-9). Emotions "boil over."(11/8, p. 12).[43] "Frustration" and "outrage" consistently describe Americans, whether directed at the situation ("frustrated that nothing could immediately be done"), at Iranians ("outraged at Iran and anyone Iranian"), or at President Carter ("all of the outrage and frustration fell squarely on the shoulders of Jimmy Carter") (11/14, p. 5). "Every American feels anger and outrage" (11/15, p. 1).[44] In ABC discourse these are natural reactions, understandable emotions given the elements of the situation.

The cry to "do something" undergirds actions by Americans, frustration being tied to the sense that "somethin's gotta' be done." Americans want action, even taking action into their own hands, refusing to load and unload Iranian ships, burning Iranians flags, signing petitions, and marching in the streets chanting "Iranians go home" (11/8, p. 16-17). "If it has to be done it has to be done. And that's it. I mean, you have to do something, I mean you just can't be gettin' pushed around" (11/8, p. 17).

> *Male high school student:* I'm mad as hell. I'm like the guy screamin' in that movie program, Network you know, I've had it. And if need be I'll bear arms against.[sic] (11/20, p. 9).

. . . . . .

---

[42] It is important to recognize that by emphasizing the impact of the situation itself, ABC essentially defines responsible leadership in terms of ability to respond *well*, not necessarily to have impact. Reactiveness is not an indication of dependence and ineffectiveness here; rather it is a necessary state, a responsible state in a situation that is out of control.

[43] See also 11/8, pp. 16-17; 11/14, pp.4-5; 11/16, pp. 1-4; 11/20, pp. 8-9. ABC cites an ABC News Poll that "37% of those polled believed the government should rely on diplomacy to free the hostages. Only 11% favor an American invasion of Iran, and 17% are in favor of threatening to use force to free the hostages. Only 12% believe the Shah should be turned over to the Iranians, and 13% think he should go, if not back to Iran then to some other country than this one." ABC reports on another American public opinion poll on 11/15, p. 4, where 64% of those polled approve "of the way President Carter is handling the situation so far." Consistent references to polls also stress the involvement of the American people.

[44] See also 11/14, p. 4; 11/16, p. 4; 11/20, p. 9.

> *Unidentified male:* They're outlaws in my opinion, they're international outlaws. They've no respect for any authority at all except some 95 year old man who's livin' in the 14th century. And they're treatin' us like we're some banana republic or somethin'. So we have to have somebody stand up and do somethin' to just show we're not gonna' take it, we're not gonna' take it [sic] anymore (11/20, p. 9).

In stark contrast to the measured, thoughtful steps described as taken by Carter and the U.S. government, the actions of the American people appear to be spontaneous combustion, an uncontrollable reaction based in emotion. The American public appears to be more than willing to forgo principle in order to get some action.[45] Action is legitimized by the emotional response to the crisis, a response grounded in patriotism as well as the "stalemate" (11/8, p. 17). Says one man to ABC, "When I watch TV, the news, and I see what they do to that flag, it gets me in the heart" (11/8, p. 17).[46]

The emotional reaction of Americans is clearly connected by November 20 to the sense of being manipulated by external forces. To add insult to injury, this good country *allows* its own abuse *because* we are moral and uphold humanitarian principles:

> *Town barber:* I think one should put a foot down. You don't see these small countries pushing Russia around. They know better, they know they'll do something about it. But that's America I guess, they give the world anything they want and then they get stabbed in the back and they turn right around and they give it to them again but that's America (11/20, p. 9).

Considering ABC's portrayal of the Carter Administration and the policies of the United States in conjunction with ABC's discussion of the concerns of the American people, contradictions appear in force. Carter is shown to be leading the country down a path based upon principles and high morals, a person choosing the wisest course despite the possibility that it would appear otherwise. The American public, on the other hand, is portrayed as angry, outraged, willing to set aside principles of morality in order to preserve image, in order to "show 'em." Furthermore, the criterion of humanitarianism, one of the foundations for asserting strength on the parts of Carter and the United States, is not only questioned as a valid criterion but it is put in sharp relief as contributing to *lack* of strength. With the predominant legitimation for Carter's actions rooted in humanitarian and moral

---

[45] This contrast is emphasized in ABC's reports comparing American public opiinion to Carter's "ultimate responsibility" (11/8, p. 10) and in the examination of public desires compared to exigencies of the situation (such as kicking out Iranians or going to war). See 11/8, pp. 9-11 for example.

[46] See also 11/20, pp. 9-10.

considerations, the growing suspicion voiced by the American people--that humanitarian values have contributed to America's weakness--poses a serious contradiction. Furthermore, Carter's commitment to the lives of the hostages (which provides the legitimation for his "restraint") creates the measure by which the Carter Administration and America are to be judged. The hostages become an ever stronger lever by which to "blackmail" the United States. In the ABC scenario, the very commitment to humanitarian principles therefore undermines the ability to achieve humanitarian ends--the safe return of the hostages.[47]

The challenge to the humanitarian criterion potentially undermines the legitimacy of Carter, his actions, and the actions of the U.S. government should humanitarian considerations remain the priority. A dichotomous question emerges: whether actions based on humanitarian concerns are indeed a sign of strength, or whether they indicate lack of strength. Two opposing demands result:

1) America must be humane, placing the lives of the hostages above all else;

2) America must be strong, and not allow itself to be pushed around.

America will be judged by how well it enacts the first demand, but to do so will prove weakness. America will also be judged by its strength or weakness. The first demand cannot be met without failing to fulfill the second.

The disjuncture between hostages' lives and the strength of the United States is formulated in these opposing demands calling for humanity along with strength, but with humanity being equated with weakness. Ultimately, a humanitarian outcome is the yardstick by which to measure Carter and his ability to do his job; yet this same criterion leads to America's inability to have impact upon the situation. Carter's legitimacy, and the wisdom of his action-as-restraint policy are undermined by the very criterion by which that policy is to be judged. It is paradoxical, a circularity of contradictions, and the situation becomes more powerful and confusing than ever.

The Ayatollah Khomeini

If Carter and the United States are not able to exert influence in this situation, then control must reside elsewhere. ABC's search also focuses upon the Ayatollah Khomeini and upon the Iranian people. Khomeini and the Iranian people emerge as the two most powerful elements in this situation, but their interdependence diffuses the locus of control making them virtually untouchable.

From the first broadcast in this series, the Ayatollah Khomeini is identified as a major figure in the crisis. While on the one hand ABC stresses the involvement of the Iranian people, the network also depicts Ayatollah Khomeini as the force directing the actions taken by the Iranians, including the students who hold the hostages. He "fully

---

[47] See in particular 11/14, which develops the angle of the hostages being the vehicle for judgment of the U.S. The U.S. makes its position also contingent on the release of the hostages, according to ABC: "when the hostages are released, everything is possible" (11/14, p. 6).

back[s]" the taking of American hostages, the students being his "followers."[48] It is *Khomeini's* demand that the Shah be returned to Iran, and any negotiation depends upon dealing "in the murky world of the Ayatollah and his mullahs." Khomeini determines the response to efforts by the United States to negotiate. He is impervious as well, as ABC asserts that "efforts by the U.N., the Vatican, and the PLO have had no impact upon the Ayatollah."[49]

ABC examines Khomeini's character as well. Is he senile? A mystic, divinely inspired? A maniac?[50] Is he doing this for personal aggrandizement?[51] We are told that Khomeini is "unrelenting," "single-minded," and bordering on being unreachable.[52] The relationship of Khomeini's power to his mystery is emphasized by ABC's attention to trying to understand his character. "There is . . . an understandable obsession here with trying to understand the Ayatollah himself" ABC tells us.(11/16, p. 7). Khomeini's character as an implacable ideologue "who doesn't like to deal in details" hovers over the situation. "He has little capacity for compromise and doesn't negotiate in any Western sense. . . . Khomeini cannot be intimidated by threats to his person, and does not care what the rest of the world thinks."[53]

Khomeini's power in this situation pervades ABC's descriptions. The students/militants may be the actual perpetrators, but Ayatollah Khomeini is the key for resolving the crisis. Hope for resolution and release of the hostages is linked to Khomeini's authority, for example, "For the first time, U.S. officials were suggesting a glimmer of hope. They believe that the Iranian Foreign Minister is now acting with the authority of the Ayatollah Khomeini" (11/15, pp. 2-3).[54]

> The Ayatollah Khomeini set the days' events in motion with a speech . . . filled with his special brand of invective against the United States, but also including a clear threat to place the remaining forty-nine American hostages on trial as spies (11/20, p. 1-2).

Clearly, the Ayatollah Khomeini is portrayed by ABC as a very powerful entity having wide-ranging effects. Nevertheless, Khomeini's power is derived from the situation.

---

[48] 11/8, p. 3-4. See also 11/15, p. 3; 11/16, p. 1.

[49] 11/14, p. 3-4. See also 11/8, p. 6; 11/14, pp. 1, 8-9.

[50] 11/16, p. 7.

[51] The holding of the hostages is an act which serves Khomeini's personal purposes: "Khomeini's personal involvement is now entirely in the open. . . . There is no doubt that he is using the hostages to rekindle a fading revolution" (11/14, p. 4). See also 11/16, p. 11.

[52] 11/14, pp. 4-5; 11/16, p. 8.

[53] 11/16, pp. 7-8. In contrast, the Shah is characterized as "reachable" and "human" (11/22, p.3).

[54] See also 11/19, p. 1; 11/23, p. 3.

It is a special brand of power where he is able to exploit the hatred, suspicion, and emotion directed toward the Shah and the U.S. in combination with political and religious fervor, all characteristics of the situation. As villainous as he appears to be, and as powerful as he is described, Khomeini is dependent upon the people to do his bidding. He "makes these masses move" (11/16, p. 7), but he is also subject to the will of the people: "When [Ayatollah Khomeini] says something all of the Iranian people accept that. Because that is the thing that all of the Iranian people want."[55] A discussion between ABC correspondents Peter Jennings and Bob Dyk is characteristic:

> *Jennings*: I guess my interpretation is a simple one.... If the Ayatollah Khomeini said "Let the hostages go," it is my belief that they would be released,... the Ayatollah says only in his view what the wishes of the Iranian people are... [garbled]...
> *Dyk*: Which is why it could be some time before we hear the Ayatollah order the release of the hostages, because the Ayatollah has a way of gauging the consensus of the country or at least how far he can go in making a request that may be considered unpopular by many here (11/16, pp. 10-11).[56]

Although Khomeini emerges strongly by November 20 as a powerful force in this situation, and although he is identified as a motivator and legitimizer for action taken by other Iranians, there remains the possibility, even the probability, that even he is not in control. Two events coincide with the increase in polarization evident in ABC discourse. First, on November 19, thirteen American hostages were released, Blacks and women who were not considered "spies" by Iran. The release of only some hostages raised fears for the safety of those remaining. Second, on November 21 the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan was burned by "mobs" after a report that the U.S. had been involved in the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by "armed men" (11/21, p. 2). The polarization evident in ABC discourse had been focusing upon Khomeini, but it quickly spreads to any group identified as being comprised of religious extremists. As events in Pakistan and in Saudi Arabia unfold, religious extremism becomes increasingly associated with mob action, and stability is linked to governmental (not religious) authorities. For example, in Pakistan, the government is able to contain the "mob", and in Saudi Arabia the government is shown "counteracting" the actions of "extremist Moslems [sic]," also identified as a "fanatical sect" (11/21, p. 2). Shi'ite Muslims, the religious identification for many Iranians are characterized as extremist and fanatical, and are distinguished from Suni Muslims who are described as moderates who can be trusted.[57] ABC describes the "civilian population" as "armed and dangerous. This makes it difficult for the government, the military, or anyone else to control the whims of what is often an armed mob" (11/23, p. 9).

---

[55] 11/16, p. 4. This is spoken by Hamid, one of the embassy occupiers interviewed by ABC.

[56] See also 11/23, p. 4-5: "Whatever is in the mind of the Ayatollah, the crowds that appear every day to march on the beseiged American Embassy seem to echo not only his thinking but the intensity of his hatred for the West." Also 11/28, p. 1-2; 11/26, p. 4.

Khomeini, just as the other individuals in this situation, is subject to the interplay of elements comprising this system, a confusing array of pieces that are often contradictory. The Iranian mobs are impervious to external control versus being manipulated, the Ayatollah Khomeini moves the masses versus merely doing the bidding of the people. The situation is out of control, the parts of the situation are not out of control. Maybe. Time after time we are told of contradictory impulses within this situation reinforcing the feeling that there *is* no sense here. By November 20, Khomeini is increasingly described as exerting power--albeit because the people want him to exert power. He is described as affecting not only the United States via the hostages, but the principles of Islam, the application of international law, and the political stability of other nations.[57] Khomeini may just be abiding by the will of the people, but without him "this crisis would not have been possible" (11/21, p. 5). ABC sums it up: "Khomeini claims God has given him all the rules" meaning "anything can happen now" (11/20, p. 7). On December 3, Khomeini is described as having "tightened his personal grip on the government and the people of Iran" (p.3). By December 7, Iran is described as "a volatile mixture of religion and politics. . . . Ayatollah Khomeini's dream of an Islamic Republic"(p. 2). Khomeini is in control: "Tonight Ayatollah Khomeini supporters had the last word. Taking to rooftops throughout this capitol they responded to Khomeini's call to show their support. Obeying Khomeini's wishes" (12/7, p.2).

Khomeini is depicted as a ubiquitous force which is antagonistic to the interests of the United States and who cannot be touched. Thus we are left with a number of sources of power which affect one another but in unknown ways. Furthermore, the two most powerful elements contributing to this crisis--the Iranian people and the Ayatollah Khomeini--are virtually untouchable. The latter is depicted as impervious, and the former is an amorphous concept, an entity of undefined proportions, overwhelming in its mass. Furthermore, it is never really clear that Khomeini actually could do the bidding of the United States could he be reached. The situation is characterized by ambiguity, confusion, and futility.

Khomeini's emergence as an identified villain, in addition to the characterization of villains as religious extremists (Shi'ite Muslims) provides needed explanations and order in light of the incoherence characterizing this situation.[58] The building emphasis upon Khomeini as powerful villain has further implications when put in conjunction with the opposing demands which emerge through ABC's examination of the situation in the United States: to be humanitarian as opposed to being strong. Faced with an identified supposedly powerful force, whether an individual or a group, the second demand--to be strong--takes on even greater

---

[57] 11/20, pp. 7-8. Khomeini is also described as imposing his will on individual's personal lives as well: "he becomes very explicit about sexual relations, about personal hygiene, even bathroom behavior. . . . It's more than a political philosophy he's imposing, it's one that dictates the personal life of each and every Iranian" (11/23, p.).

[58] The constant aura of Khomeini permeating the visuals in ABC coverage contributes to the sense of his impact. Even when he is not mentioned verbally, visuals consistently show his presence in the background. E.g., pictures on the walls behind embassy occupiers holding a news conference; banners bearing Khomeini's likeness held aloft by crowds of demonstrators; even pictures of Khomeini on the side of oil pipelines and storage tanks.

importance. The search for clarity reinforces the developing polarization and demand for strength. ABC's coverage in the America Held Hostage series portrays a situation in need of explanation, a situation which is chaotic and impervious to sense-making, and a situation ripe for exploitation by a manipulating fanatic whom no ordinary person could understand.

Image, Power, and Unity

Ultimately, ABC's attempts to discern order in the situation coalesce in discussions of image, power, and the need for a unified vision. In ABC discourse, the strength of the United States depends upon the symbolic value of the image of the U.S. in others' eyes. Furthermore, the beliefs we as a people hold evolve as critical to U.S. power: we must believe in the strength and rightness of the United States, and we must show that we are unified in this belief.

The image of the United States is a concern expressed throughout ABC's analysis of this situation. "It must be made clear to everyone that the U.S. is a giant which is neither pitiful nor helpless," ABC says (11/20, p. 4).[59] This is a "power-struggle" waged in the realm of the symbolic. Actions not only have instrumental consequences, their impact is expanded because of what they "mean". For example, the embassy "fell," and we are told it was a "victory" for the "activists" (11/8, p. 2-3). In addition, ABC tells us, "The state of affairs has been described by responsible people here [in Iran] as economic and political warfare"; it is a "test of wills," a "war of words and nerves," the symbolic effects taking precedence over the physical effects.[60] "Symbolism is important to many Iranians" we are told, as behaviors are dissected for their symbolic meanings.[61] It is a metaphorical "war," waged in the realm of the symbolic. The key is in what the Iranians believe, whether "beliefs, convictions or prejudices" (11/23, p. 4). Just as every other part of this situation, the power-struggle is also surreal: "You can take anything that occurs here, anything that is said here, two ways." Through waging this symbolic war the parties will "either win or lose," this being a "test of will and morality" (11/14, p. 9-10).

The importance of image is underscored with the portrayal of the crisis as receiving world-wide attention. "The crisis in Iran . . . has made one small plot of land the focal point for millions of Americans and other people around the world" (11/19, p. 5-6). Algeria, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the European allies, even the Vatican are potentially involved.[62] As the situation comes to be defined in

---

59 See also 11/28, p. 2.

60 11/22, p. 3; 11/14, p. 1.

61 For example, "an effigy of the former Shah in flames represented what they would like to do to him" (11/14, p. 1).

62 11/8, p. 13; 11/14, p. 4; 11/20, p. 3. The extent of their involvement is influenced in part by the perception of U.S. power. See 11/14, pp. 8-9; 11/20, p. 4. Concern over oil supplies is also cited as one reason for the involvement of other countries, but even more important are the *meanings* of the

terms of its symbolic meaning, "power" is associated with *perceptual* effect as opposed to *pragmatic* effect, with power resulting from the perception others have of U.S. image: "[N]ow more than ever it becomes a struggle for world opinion" (12/3, p. 1). Actions themselves may have limited pragmatic consequences, but the meanings of those actions extend their impact globally. "If this kind of thing is done in Iran, it could be done in any country to any country," says ABC (11/19, p. 5). Past decisions are reassessed in light of their symbolic value and possible interpretation:

> It may have been a tactical mistake to rule out [military] force in the first place. It seemed like the thing to do at the time in the interests of not provoking the militants. But it now seems that this was interpreted by the Ayatollah and his followers as a lack of American resolve (11/20, pp. 3-4).[63]

Concern over "media manipulation" additionally highlights the concern over image, with actions in Iran being termed "media events," staged for effect.[64] Whether by the U.S. or by the Iranians, actions are portrayed as messages with their symbolic value having precedence over their pragmatic effect.[65]

Since actions are messengers for those in the U.S. just as surely as for those in Iran, then the instrumental outcome of those actions loses its significance. Instead, as one American says, "Just shoot a couple of 'em, show 'em we mean business" (11/20, p. 9).[66] Such thoughts are not only reserved for the American public: "The people here in the White House feel that something more has to be done to punish Iran . . . something more to say to the world, 'they cannot do this with impunity'" (11/15, p. 5). In contrast, talk or messages come to be portrayed as a form of action. For example, "harsher words" and "threats" from the Iranians change the situation, making it more dangerous (11/16, p. 1 & 5). A speech by the Ayatollah Khomeini "set the days events in motion," with the Carter Administration responding with a statement "obtusely worded but unmistakably clear" which has further impact (11/20, p. 1-2). Through talk "the warning [is] given, the crisis deepened" (11/20, p. 2). Action becomes symbolic and the symbolic becomes action, as the crux of the power-struggle solidifies into a concern over the *image* of power.

---

actions taken by both Iran and the United States. See for example, 11/8, p. 14. ABC disclaims concern over oil to some extent, emphasizing again the importance of the underlying principles legitimizing Carter's handling of the crisis: "Iranian oil is important to us, certainly not as important as American lives, but still a matter for concern" (11/8, p. 14). Nevertheless, "Can we live without it? . . . yes" (11/14, p. 5).

63 The U.S. is described as explaining the meaning of its actions as well. See 11/14, p. 4; 11/20, p. 3.

64 E.g., see 11/22, pp. 3-4; 11/28, pp. 7-8.

65 It is the Iranian aim to "show all the peoples [sic] of the world what the United States has been doing" by "refusing to allow the hostages to leave the American embassy" (11/20, p. 6), the action conveying the message.

66 See also 11/20, pp. 8, 10.

Symbolic action, therefore, appears as the one route by which impact can be made. Thus, power becomes critically tied to image, for power to "win" and "lose" is dependent upon image projected and perceived. In addition, image evolves as the measure of the "will" and the "morality" characterizing the parties to this struggle. Moral action is transformed into whatever will demonstrate assumed power. Image is thus both means and end. Because image is a vehicle for achieving the humanitarian outcome, if it can be achieved the paradox of the humanitarian criterion will be destroyed. The focus becomes how to achieve the image that will result in the power needed to achieve the humanitarian outcome. It is in this context that considerations of military action begin to be assessed.

ABC discusses military action in the first broadcast in this series, but consistently points out that military action would not work: "Military intervention would be the surest way of getting the hostages killed" (11/8, p. 8-9).[67] In ABC discussions, military action is in the background, a route to follow contingent upon the conditions within the situation: "if the hostages are harmed or if the Soviet Union invades Iran" (11/14, p. 7).[68] Nevertheless, despite the fact that it probably wouldn't work, military action remains an option: "In the worst case I think we have to accept the fact that the United States would be prepared to take some kind of [military] action" (11/19, p. 5). "Military options have been polished up but are still set aside" (11/14, p. 4). It's an option of last resort, "still at the bottom of the list" (11/14, p. 7). Yet, it is an option.

On November 20, ABC reports that Carter and his advisors "make the decision on the spot to rule in the use of military force" (11/20, p. 1). The Defense Department no longer denies that military movements are related to Iran, according to ABC, and the United States is described as having "enormous striking power at hand" (11/20, p. 2).[69] There is a crucial differences, however, between ABC representation on November 20 and earlier discussions: military action is now described as a viable option not because it suddenly could save lives but because of its value as message.[70] The rhetorical result of military action becomes the focus, allowing it to leave its place at the bottom of the list and to command attention as a realistic alternative. *Its rhetorical effect legitimizes military action:*

> If the threat of force has no effect it will be possible for the [aircraft] carriers to strike at Iranian air and naval bases. This is considered a workable option because it would *make the message clear*, damage Iran's defenses

---

67 See also 11/20, p. 3.

68 ABC also points out the conflict in employing a food embargo as a weapon: "The United States would, in effect, be creating the kind of situation in Iran that it condemns in Cambodia: starvation for political ends" (11/14, p. 7).

69 See also 11/20, p. 3.

70 Including its value as message to the American people. Says one man identified by ABC as a "hawk": "I think this Administration understands that they face an angry America. I've never seen anything like it since Pearl Harbor" (11/21, p. 3).

> and keep civilian casualties to a minimum (11/20, pp. 2-3; emphasis added).[71]

The role of military force is presented as both pragmatic and rhetorical, but it is *not* portrayed as effective in obtaining the hostages' release. Instead, the effectiveness of military force lay in its rhetorical capabilities:

> And what would trigger the use of force? A trial? A sentence? An actual move to injure? Purposely, no answer is being provided here to that question. The message to the Ayatollah is "let the American hostages go now, in order to avoid finding out" (11/20, p. 2).

Discussions of military force as viable option wax and wane in ABC's coverage throughout the time period studied. When actual instrumentality once again is the focus, the military option recedes like a shadow. It is there, but it is not a primary option. ABC notes the waning presence and the contrast of options. While "peaceful means" are undeniably the preferred vehicle for resolving the crisis, still ABC notes the continuing "spectre, if not the substance of the threat to use military force."[72] By December 7, the military option is described as a workable one, if difficult, but not used because of the desire to exercise "military restraint" (12/7, p. 3). In addition, ABC shows Carter highlighting instrumental effectiveness once again as justification for "restraint": "I am not going to take any military action that would cause bloodshed or arouse the unstable captors of our hostages to atttack them or punish them" (12/7, p. 3). ABC contrasts words of U.S. officials with its own analysis:

> The U.S. has the capability . . . but not the inclination, officials say. . . . The bottom line is that none of these [military] operations can be conducted easily. Each has drawbacks. Diplomatic repercussions for the U.S., and the risk of death and injury to the men involved.[73]

The fact that military options are discussed so thoroughly on December 7 is not surprising, given the military significance of the date. What is more interesting is that once again the instrumental effectiveness is predominant in contrast to the rhetorical consequences of military action. In the America Held Hostage coverage, as long as military force is considered in relation to pragmatic effect, it remains in the background, an option of last resort only to be used when the lives of the hostages are

---

[71] See also 11/20, p. 9. Legitimation for action is also claimed by the United States as based in international law, says ABC. See 11/20, pp. 1-2. Khomeini's *words* are also portrayed as justification for Americans: "The Ayatollah Khomeini called on . . . Iranians to, quote, 'Rub America's snout in the dust.' Well, for many Americans those are fighting words" (12/7, p. 5).

[72] 11/28, p. 3. See also 11/23, p. 8; 11/28, p. 8; 12/7, p. 3.

[73] 12/7, p. 6-7.

no longer the primary concern. Military action attains a place as a viable and even a preferable alternative when it comes to be seen as the message that will persuade rather than the action that will work. In addition, it becomes the message to the world which will shore up the image of America. With the shift from being an unworkable option to a realistic alternative, the role of military action becomes central.

By late November, the characterization of this situation is one where beliefs provide the power to change the situation. Whether military action or words, the effectiveness of actions is assessed in terms of potential impact upon beliefs. It is in this context that the call for a united front emerges.

The importance of being unified in our beliefs appears in commentaries about the unity in the United States as contrasted to disunity in Iran. Unity is where strength lay, for the Iranians. The threat of attack by the U.S. is "unifying boost" (11/23, p. 9). "No, we don't have the military power to confront the United States," an Iranian tells the ABC audience, "but we have the faith, the will, and it's much more stronger [sic] than the weapons" (11/21, p. 6). ABC, however, shows a different scene. ABC tells viewers there is a "jockeying for political power" when the Revolutionary Council "fires" acting Foreign Minister Bani-Sadr and replaces him with Ghobtzadeh (11/28, p. 5-6). There is a "power struggle" between the government and the militant students: "Iran's Foreign Minister said some of the hostages will be released soon, but he was promptly and emphatically contradicted by the militants at the Embassy who said 'we will release nobody, nobody at all'"(12/7, p. 10). Disunity in Iran is also portrayed in discussions of dissension among the mullahs. Iranian leaders, we are told, appeal "for calm" as crowds shout their support for religious leaders *other* than Khomeini (12/7, p. 1-2). The Iranian people are supposedly unified behind Khomeini, but the evidence presented shows that this is not entirely true. "Certainly, they are not speaking in one voice."[74]

In the United States, there is no question but that we believe we are in the "right," as ABC describes it, and it is our unity that confirms our "rightness." Whereas in ABC coverage Khomeini is clearly an unreasonable, fanatical extremist, and the major force behind denial of personal and religious freedom, we are the opposite. We are *Americans*, the brave, the free, the consistent, the right--the unified. There is "virtually unanimous support for President Carter's new policy, a policy that does not rule out the use of force." Even hawks and doves agree (11/21, p. 3). We are "a nation united" (11/22, p. 4), consistent, firm, with no dissent among us (11/23, p. 2-3). Our government works as a team, producing decisions supported by all (11/23, p. 3).

While calls for unity emanate from the White House, ABC also shows evidence of unified belief across the nation. Carter warns that lack of unity will be used as a "sign of weakness," resulting in further "abuse of our hostages" and he reportedly goes "to extraordinary lengths to keep Congress briefed on this crisis and to urge members to stand behind him."[75] As if in response, ABC shows that support for Carter abounds: "No one could have reacted negatively" (11/28, p. 5). In ABC's telling, it is not simply a matter of Carter calling for unity, but there *is* unity: in Los Angeles, in

---

[74] 12/7, p. 1; see also 12/3, p. 3.

[75] 11/28, p. 2, 5.

Louisville, in Nashville "thousands gathered tonight . . . to express American solidarity." Iranian students in Nashville also march, but they are warned "that the American people will not be divided" (12/3, p. 1).

The importance of unity is strikingly demonstrated in the response to Senator Edward Kennedy when he criticizes both the Shah and U.S. policy regarding the Shah:

> *Kennedy:* I think he was looking out after one person, himself. I think that was the number one interest of the Shah, to look out after himself. I think to tie American fortunes to one man, rather than a whole nation and a people is a policy that's bankrupt(12/3, p. 4).

Kennedy's criticism is quickly framed as a challenge to the concept of unity and the power that unified belief affords. ABC tells us, "Kennedy had broken ranks, and he knew it" (12/3, p. 5). Kennedy's clarification fails to satisfy:

> *Kennedy*: Our firm national commitment to the safe release of the hostages does not and cannot mean that this nation must condone the Shah and the record of his regime. Support for the hostages does not mean support for the Shah.
> *ABC:* But the Administration was not about to let Kennedy off the hook.
> *White House spokesperson:* I regret what was said. I think one of the strongest weapons we have in bringing about the return of the hostages is the strong consensus that exists, and anything that tends to undermine that is clearly unhealthy.[76]

Kennedy does not accept the totality of the vision over which we must be unified, a vision in which the U.S. is clearly, uncritically right.

By December 7, the belief in the need for a unified vision is strongly established. There are two ways of seeing this situation: ours and theirs. Any

---

[76] 12/3, p. 5. ABC goes on to question the wisdom of unchallenged support for Carter: "Kennedy's criticism do raise two points that won't go away. Should Presidential decisions in this crisis go unchallenged indefinitely? Or does a time come when the national interest is served by debating them? And second, in the end it will not be so much the silence of the decisions' critics that counts as the rightness of the decisions themselves." The result of this digression once again emphasizes unity of response, for "rightness of the decisions themselves" are what matters, not the silence of critics. ABC does not go on to discuss the potential for reaching "right" decisions without subjecting them to critical discussion.

American who voices disagreement *necessarily* supports the Iranian vision.[77] Even small children become symbols of unified belief: "Mrs. Holy's second graders made unity chains. They're not sure where Iran is, but they know what it's all about" (12/7, p. 11). If disagreement exists, it is only voiced in concert with renewed calls for unity. "'We just want . . . the Iranians to know that we are united, and we will stand and we will survive.'"[78]

Participation in a unified vision is central to maintaining the power of the United States. Belief in our rightness, in the need for strength, in the need for a unified front, and in the power of image results in a powerful perspective which is difficult to challenge.

Summary

The continuing incoherence and confusion running through ABC's coverage of this crisis serves as a force for finding order. The order which begins to emerge is a dichotomous one, with clear heros (Americans) and villains (extremist Shi'ite Muslims). The polarized world view fills a vacuum created by the otherwise meaninglessness of the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in this crisis. The meaning of the crisis comes to be summarized in ABC coverage as a test of the strength, image, and power of the United States. The image of the United States depends upon its ability to: 1) maintain its principles by valuing human life above all else, and 2) demonstrate strength. The ability of the United States to demonstrate strength depends upon maintaining the image of unified belief, and upon maintaining the image of a power that cannot be manipulated nor controlled.

Ultimately, humanitarian action is redefined into application of power, and moral action is transformed into whatever will demonstrate that power. The importance of the *perception* of power culminates in the shift to from viewing military action as unworkable to discussing it as a viable *rhetorical* strategy, an extension of the increasing tendency to view action as symbolic and the symbolic as action.

Calls for action are understandable responses to a sense of confusion. Action is a traditional means for asserting and regaining power, with military action being the ultimate action and the means by which to reestablish the *image* of power. As military action begins to shift from unworkable option (because it will not result in rescuing the hostages) to realistic alternative (because it will send a message of strength), it gains a formidable place as appropriate action for dealing with this situation.[79]

---

[77] See 11/26, p. 5, where Americans living in Iran are interviewed speaking out about the need for the U.S. to understand the abuses under the Shah's rule, and to consider the legitimacy of the Iranian position. The question comes up whether these individuals are "traitors" or not.

[78] Member of hostage family, 12/7, p. 5.

[79] An analysis of CBS coverage of this same time period shows military action being depicted as a sort of "trump card", the one action which will result in regaining control. CBS and ABC thus complement

Furthermore, the configuration in which the power of the United States is dependent upon both image and unified belief creates a context wherein assessments critical of military action will be interpreted as undermining U.S. power. In the perspective developed here, there is little room for a dissenting voice.

Discussion and Implications

Terrorism, as with any strategy for social change, is concerned with redefining the nature of power. When "what is power" is turned on its head, self-image based upon power is necessarily shaken. In this case, power came to be redefined through the construction and generation of confusion. With a situation in which one is unable to discern control, any resulting search for order or sense emphasizes the inability to gain control. This, in turn, accentuates the apparent "ineffectiveness" of the power structure. The confused nature of the situation highlights the issue of power, threatening to wrench power from its traditional bases. Confusion thus serves the terrorist purpose well, calling into question the current power structure and its potency.

Terrorism is characterized by actions which are not understood, which may be random, which are unpredictable, and which are associated with groups with strange names and acronyms whose members may or may not be known. Victims are not predictable. Geography is not predictable. The means of violence is not predictable. The nature of the act is one meant to create perplexity and difficulty of definition. It is even difficult to define if an act *is* terrorism. Confusion must be considered as a powerful rhetorical strategy in terrorist events where the incoherence and indefinable nature of the phenomenon create a vacuum of meaning begging to be filled. The most obvious candidates are stereotypes of the actors and the common renderings of the situation and events which promise to help us understand, predict, and "right" things. A dominant world view which will explain events and which will promise a means of regaining a sense of power would be welcome. In the context of events such as the "Crisis in Iran," the acceptance of a dominant world view is an act of creation, not merely a matter of reflecting the views existent within the culture. These interpretive structures provide the meanings within which we function, they are not merely possibilities of meaning posited. Whereas the interpretations which explain these events draw on cultural predispositions, at the same time they contribute to their creation.

Violence as appropriate response to threatened violence is a virtually unquestioned maxim in Western culture. Few in the United States would argue with the idea that military action is justified with sufficient provocation. Philosopher Duane Cady argues that in the United States there is a "cultural predisposition" in favor of a warist position in which war or violence is morally required.[80] Violence as

---

each other in providing justification for the military option by emphasizing the instrumental consequences (CBS) and the symbolic outcomes (ABC). See Palmerton, 1988.

[80] Cady goes on: "[P]acifists are much more frequently called upon to justify their views than are those who would defend war as a legitimate activity of nations. It is presumed that the burden of proof rests on those individuals morally opposed to war and committed to alternative means of resolving

symbolic is also a familiar frame, with military action being justified not for its instrumentality but for its role as symbolic means to some instrumental end. A response to terrorism which involves turning to a cultural perspective or predisposition which sanctions violence because of its persuasive potential is ironic, since the classic definition of terrorism distinguishes terrorist actions as those designed to send a message rather than to achieve an instrumental end. An incoherent set of events in which violence or threatened violence is a major component provides fertile ground for the cultivation of seeds already existent and flourishing within a culture.

If confusion has rhetorical force for accepting prevailing explanations and justifications for responding to violent events, then research is needed which attempt to elucidate the interpretive predispositions in a culture. For example, are "warist" frames predominant? How are the necessary conditions for violent response defined? Are the necessary justifications for "just" military intervention static, or do these shift as the framing of these events shifts and evolves and as what we take as "knowledge" grows? Further study is needed to examine the role of the mass media (both news and entertainment) in the evolution of cultural perspectives on violent action, on acceptable responses to those actions, and on justifications for those responses.

Equally as disturbing are the implications of the pressure to maintain unified participation in the world view providing the desired sense. The "Crisis in Iran" became a "war" of definition. The urge to maintain image increased the pressure not only to show a united front but to participate in a unified belief system. Unity became a vehicle by which to attain power in this situation. As such, any piece of information or interpretation that threatened that unity was unwelcome because it was defined as decreasing power. The desire to grasp meaning in such a situation functions as pressure to maintain the belief system; this in turn results in reduced information because information or interpretation which doesn't "fit" is ignored, self-censored, or simply not perceived. Furthermore, the "warist" position includes the belief that violence can be "just" or "moral" if certain conditions are met. For violent action to be "moral," however, justification is required.[81] A unified front requires that we limit our awareness (or acknowledgement) of data which does not support the "just-war" position and its justification. Violence is then justified on the basis of information which does not challenge the unified vision. Cultural interpretive structures combined with pressure to maintain unity may well justify actions far removed from the instrumental ends sought.

Our attempts to label keep us from seeing. We fill the vacuum with our own predisposed ideas, our own expectations and our own limited knowledge. We selectively perceive those things which fit our perceptions and turn to sources which will confirm our version of truth.[82]

---

conflict. This is because warism is a cultural given, a national presupposition in the modern West. . . . the war system, the standard operating procedure of sovereign states . . . goes almost wholly unquestioned." Duane Cady, From Warism to Pacifism: A Moral Continuum, Philadelphia, PA: Temple Univ. Press, 1989, p. 8.

81 See Cady, p. 50.

82 For an important discussion of Western news coverage of Iran and the consequences of Western ethnocentrism, see William A. Dorman and Ehsan Omeed, "Reporting Iran the shah's way," Columbia

Perception of attack from an external enemy is additional pressure for not investigating details which are relevant, explanatory, but not congruent with the knowledge we have accepted. Such diversity challenges the power structure, which is difficult to tolerate when the goal of the "enemy" is to change the power structure. It is often said that knowledge is power, but in this case purposeful repression of knowledge is defined as power. If maintaining the current power structure is what is important, then maintaining the belief system which supports it appears to be important. We do what we can to maintain it, including "protecting" ourselves from relevant information which makes us appear less powerful (i.e., not unified) in the short-run. Furthermore, we protect our perception of our own morality by protecting ourselves from information which challenges our justifications for violent response. At the risk of reducing our power long-term, we maintain the image of power and morality short-term.

Terrorism and the media intertwine in a dynamic which paralyzes information seekers and givers because of the strength of the belief system which says we must maintain the belief system. Categorizing action as "terrorist" denies voice to the perpetrators of this violence. Denial of legitimacy to the knowledge offered by such groups is the order of the day. The label "terrorist" objectifies and legitimizes the denial of voice, making suspect any discussion which even suggests legitimacy for the individuals so labeled. Terrorism as a strategy therefore inevitably results in denial of voice for the "terrorist" as a means of protecting the current power structure, for granting voice inevitably reinforces of the violence deplored.[83] Furthermore, voice is denied to any challenger to the dominant explanatory vision and justificatory structures.

The question once again arises: are more actions "terrorist" or are we simply framing these phenomena differently? Certainly, those violent actions with which the power structure agrees do not suffer loss of voice.[84] In the history of the United States there have been many instances where random acts of violence intended to "send a message" were not labeled "terrorist," nor were the perpetrators denied voice. One need only think of violent acts under the banner of the Ku Klux Klan or actions taken against Native Americans in the name of civilization to realize that violence itself does not result in denial of voice for the perpetrators.[85] Today, State-sponsored violence and violence by dominant members of a society are not likely to be called "terrorist" by that society, being so labeled only by those who would deny legitimacy and voice to the actors.

Journalism Review, January/February 1979: 27-33. Others have found the lack of diversity of coverage between networks, and the lack of information relevant to understanding the conflict. See Altheide, 1982; Atwater, 1985-TWA.

83 Note it is only deplored if not in service of the *approved* ends.

84 See Noam Chomsky

85 See Robert Terrell and Kristina Ross, "Terrorism: Historical Overview of U.S. Press Coverage and the Contemporary Voluntary Guidelines Controversy," Presented at The Terrorism and the News Media Research Project conference, "Communication in Terrorist Events: Functions, Themes and Consequences," Boston, MA 1988.

The ways in which these events are framed contribute to the evolving beliefs we take as sufficient knowledge. The urge for unity to maintain power may well function in other similarly labeled events. As researchers and news providers, we need to look at what is *not* evident as well as what is, and to consider the interpretive structures within which we too function. We should assume denial of voice, when the "terrorist" label appears, and we should ask ourselves what, then, is being denied. This study emphasizes the importance of studying what is *not* there, and of recognizing our own blinders. If we are to understand how media coverage and terrorism interact, we must be considering what is not reported as well as what is, and we must understand that our own voices may well be seen as legitimizing the "enemy" when we step outside the prevailing perspective to comment upon it.

For the researcher looking at the interaction of terrorism and the media, a shift in goals is warranted. Much of the literature discussing the terrorism/media interaction essentially examines the ways in which terrorists challenge the State and the complicity (unintended) of the media in effecting that challenge. The analysis reported here points to the importance of also considering the functions of the label itself in relationship to the structures of meaning that guide and justify the perspectives and actions of the State.

Terrorism is indeed a "fact" of modern life, but it is a fact only for those who agree upon its definition. When confronted with events we label "terrorist" it is important that we realize the characteristics of the structures of meaning we are using to help us determine and justify our response. It is also important that we gain insight into the ramifications of the decision to participate in the interpretive structures which evolve.